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TAGS: PREL PGOV LO

SUBJECT: NEW FM LAJCAK ON THE JOB; UNCLEAR HOW LONG HE WILL REMAIN IN BOSNIA

REF: SARAJEVO 100

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires, a.i., Keith Eddins, for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (U) Summary: On Monday, January 26, President Gasparovic formally appointed Miroslav Lajcak to replace Jan Kubis as Slovakia's Foreign Minister. Lajcak, currently serving as the EU Special Representative and High Representative in Bosnia-Herzegovina, has stated that he intends to remain in Sarajevo until his successor is selected to ensure the continuity of the mission. Lajcak is a well-regarded, apolitical diplomat who enjoys a good deal of international recognition due to his work in the Balkans. We anticipate he will continue to prioritize U.S.-Slovak ties within the constraints of the Fico Administration. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Rampant press speculation about Jan Kubis's successor as Foreign Minister was definitively resolved on Monday, January 26, when President Gasparovic officially appointed Miroslav Lajcak to the post. Lajcak accepted the position on the condition that he be allowed to remain in Bosnia until his successor is in place (or at least on track to arrive). Precise details on how this "condition" will be implemented remain unclear, however, and we discount press reports that he could remain in Bosnia until March.

¶3. (S) After former FM Kubis's December announcement that he intended to resign, we heard from several MFA contacts that Lajcak was being considered, but that he took himself out of the running because of his commitment to the OHR in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where he has served since July 2007. Press reports in early January indicated that MFA Political Director Igor Slobodnik was the leading contender for the post. Subsequent reports surfaced with allegations of Slobodnik's fiscal mismanagement of the Slovak mission to NATO, and we heard privately that Slobodnik and other career diplomats being considered for the job were less than eager to serve as PM Fico's Foreign Minister. They believe most foreign policy decisions are made at the Government Office, rather than the MFA, and that being a minister in a Fico-led government could damage their long-term careers. We do not know if Slobodnik was offered the job and refused, or if PM Fico decided upon Lajcak because of his international standing.

¶4. (C) Comment: PM Fico's selection of a new Foreign Minister was undoubtedly delayed by the holiday season and the gas crisis, yet we note that the tenor of the public and private debate on Kubis's successor exposes the degree to which serving the Fico Administration is seen by the diplomatic corps as a hardship. We expect Lajcak will, like his predecessor, face the challenges of explaining various "personal" statements of the Prime Minister and xenophobic outbursts by coalition partner Jan Slota, whose party views Lajcak as too pro-American. Also, in welcoming Lajcak to the job, PM Fico issued a difficult challenge (and a

none-too-subtle broadside at departing Minister Kubis): "I expect from him a new phase at the Ministry, a period of much greater activity in the economic and commercial fields. I think Mr. Minister quickly understood that this is a completely new period and that the Ministry must work in a completely different way." Unfortunately for Lajcak, despite almost three years of efforts to develop an understanding between the Foreign and Economic Ministries on how a commercial/economic function would be carried out (and by whom), almost no progress has been made.

¶5. (C) Comment, cont.: While we note with interest (and some concern) the assessment of our colleagues in Sarajevo of Lajcak's performance at OHR, he is certainly viewed here as one of the more capable (and ambitious) diplomats in the Slovak Foreign Service. His experience in the Balkans can be expected to give impetus to greater and more coherent Slovak activism in the region and could invest him with the gravitas needed to stand up, when necessary, to PM Fico.

EDDINS